

JERRY H. BENTLEY

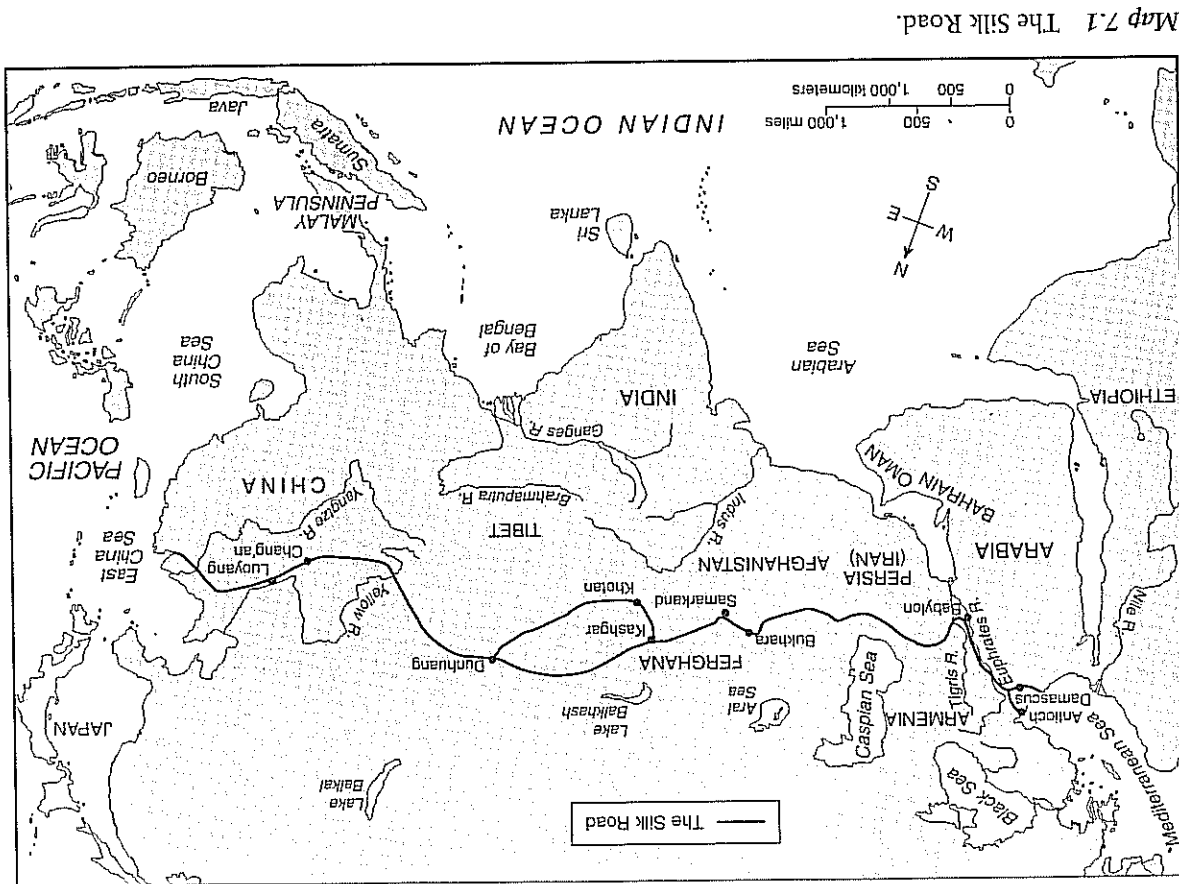
The Spread of World Religions

In this selection, modern historian Jerry Bentley examines a range of cultural and religious encounters that occurred across Eurasia in the period between 400 B.C.E. and 400 C.E. He first explores the spread of Buddhism from India northward to China and southward to Southeast Asia, highlighting the importance of merchants and trade in seeding new conversions. According to Bentley, what accounted for the initial resistance to Buddhism in China and the resounding success of Indian ideas and faiths in Southeast Asia? What relationships developed between religious and political leaders that aided the spread of Buddhism? Where do you see instances of cultural exchange?

Bentley then examines the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire, from its rocky start as a faction of rebellious Jews to its eventual legalization under the emperor Constantine in 313 C.E. What specific developments does Bentley highlight to explain Christianity's success? What similarities and differences were there between the way Buddhism and Christianity spread?

Thinking Historically

In addition to describing *how* cultures and religions spread throughout Eurasia during this period, Bentley also asks *why*. What makes a people convert to a "foreign" religion? In trying to answer this question, he distinguishes three patterns of religious conversion. One he calls "voluntary association," the choice one people make to accept another group's religion largely for the benefits of associating with them. The second type of conversion is syncretism, or assimilation, the blending of old and new religious practices that usually occurs gradually over the course of generations. The third pattern is conversion by pressure, when people are forced by political, economic, or social pressure to accept a new religion. Obviously, these categories overlap, and it is often difficult to tell whether a conversion is voluntary or coerced. Which of these patterns best describes the spread of Christianity and Buddhism? How useful do you find these categories? Can you think of other patterns of religious conversion?



Map 7.1 The Silk Road.

... Buddhism benefited enormously from the commercial traffic that crossed the silk roads. Once it arrived on the trade routes, Buddhism found its way very quickly indeed to distant lands. Merchants proved to be an efficient vector of the Buddhist faith, as they established diaspora communities in the string of oasis towns—Merv, Bukhara, Samarkand, Kashgar, Khotan, Kuqa, Turpan, Dunhuang—that served as lifeline of the silk roads through central Asia. The oases depended heavily on trade for their economic survival, and they quickly accommodated the needs and interests of the merchants whom they hosted. They became centers of high literacy and culture; they organized markets and arranged for lodging, care of animals, and storage of merchandise; and they allowed their guests to build monasteries and bring large contingents of Buddhist monks and copyists into their communities. Before too long—perhaps as early as the first or even the second century B.C.E.—the oasis dwellers themselves converted to Buddhism.

Thus a process of conversion through voluntary association with well-organized foreigners underwrote the first major expansion of Buddhism outside India. Buddhist merchants linked the oases to a large and cosmopolitan world, and the oases became enormously wealthy by providing useful services for the merchants. It is not at all surprising that inhabitants of the small oasis communities would gradually incline toward the beliefs and values of the numerous Buddhist merchants who traveled the silk roads and enriched the oases.

Once established in oasis communities, Buddhism had the potential to spread both to nomadic peoples on the steppes of central Asia and even to China, a land of long-settled civilization with its own long-established cultural traditions. Buddhism realized this potential only partially, however, and only in gradual fashion. As a faith foreign to China and generally despised by Chinese during its early centuries there, Buddhism had a certain attraction for nomadic peoples who themselves had quite difficult relations with the Chinese. In other words, Buddhism exercised a kind of countercultural appeal to nomads who loathed the Chinese, but who also desired and even depended upon trade with China. Yet many nomadic peoples found it difficult to accept Buddhism; they did not have traditions of literacy to accommodate Buddhist moral and theological teachings, and their mobility made it impossible to maintain fixed monastic communities. As a result, many nomadic peoples held to their native shamanist cults, and others turned to Manichaeism¹ or Nestorian Christianity.² Meanwhile, some

of those who adopted Buddhism did so at a very late date. Among the Mongols, for example, Buddhism did not become a popular faith until the sixteenth century. When nomadic peoples became involved in commerce, however, or when they established themselves as rulers of settled lands that they conquered, they frequently adopted Buddhism through a process of conversion through voluntary association. These patterns were quite prominent in central Asia and northern China during the era of the ancient silk roads.

The career of the monk and missionary Fotudeng especially helps to illuminate the voluntary conversion of nomadic peoples to Buddhism. Fotudeng probably came from Kuqa, an oasis town on the Silk Road in modern Xinjiang. He became a priest at an early age, traveled through central Asia, visited Kashmir, and set out to do missionary work in northern China during the early fourth century. He went to Dunhuang in order to improve his Chinese, then continued on to Luoyang about the year 310. There he caught the attention of Shi Le, the ruler of the nomadic Jie people (western allies of the Xiongnu), who controlled most of northern China during the fourth century. Fotudeng realized early on that he would not get very far with Shi Le by lecturing him on fine points of Buddhist philosophy, but he had a reputation for working miracles, which he used to the advantage of his mission. He dazzled Shi Le by producing bright blue lotus blossoms from his monk's begging bowl and by looking into his palm to see the reflection of distant events. Among his more utilitarian talents were rainmaking, healing, and prophecy. Fotudeng helped Shi Le plan military campaigns by foreseeing the outcome and devising clever strategies to ensure success. As a result of his miraculous talents, Fotudeng won widespread fame, and people from distant regions worshipped him. When he died about the year 345, he reportedly had ten thousand disciples and the erection of 893 temples to his credit.

Thus did a process of voluntary conversion help to establish Buddhism in northern China. The nomadic Jie settled in northern China and became deeply engaged in the political and economic affairs of a large and complex world. Fotudeng represented the culture of that larger world and brought talents useful for Jie rulers as they entered its life. He parlayed his personal relationship with Shi Le into official approval for his efforts to spread Buddhist values and even to found Buddhist institutions in northern China. Hence, his work not only illuminates the voluntary conversion of nomadic peoples but also helps to explain the early presence of the Buddhist faith in China.

The establishment of Buddhism in China was an even more difficult and gradual affair than its spread among nomadic peoples. Indeed, it required half a millennium for Buddhism to attract a large popular following in China. There as in Persia, the foreign faith could not immediately attract many followers away from indigenous cultural traditions,

¹Third-century Persian religion; belief that the body is trapped in darkness searching for the light. [Ed.]

²Fifth-century Syrian faith that spread to India, central Asia, and China; belief in the human nature of Jesus. [Ed.]

in this case principally Confucianism and Daoism. Even in its early years in China, Buddhism encountered determined resistance from Confucian and Daoist quarters. Representatives of the native Chinese traditions charged that Buddhism detracted from the authority of the state, that monasteries were unproductive and useless drags on the economy, that Buddhism itself was a barbarian faith inferior to Chinese traditions, and that the monastic life violated the natural order of society and disrupted family life. Not surprisingly, then, during its early centuries in China, Buddhism remained largely the faith of foreigners: merchants, ambassadors, refugees, hostages, and missionaries. During the second century C.E., for example, the Buddhist monastery at Luoyang included among its inhabitants two Parthians, two Sogdians, three Indians, and three Scythians, but no known Chinese. During its early years in China, then, Buddhism seems to have served principally as a cultural resource for trade diaspora communities.

As an alien cultural tradition that did not resonate in China, Buddhism could easily have experienced the same fate there that it did in Persia: It could have survived in the quarters inhabited by foreign merchants as an expatriate faith, perhaps even for centuries, without attracting much interest from the larger host community. The explanation for Buddhism's remarkable spread as a popular faith in east Asia begins with the voluntary conversion of elites, which enabled the foreign tradition to gain a foothold in Chinese society. In the north, where Buddhism first established its presence in China, voluntary conversion reflected the political interests of ruling elites. In most cases they were nomads, such as the Jie whom Fouteng served so well, or the Toba rulers of the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534). After an initial period of tension and uncertain relations, it dawned on both Buddhists and rulers that an alliance could serve the interests of both parties. Buddhist monasteries provided ideological and economic support for established ruling houses: They recognized the legitimacy of the Jie and Toba rule; they facilitated long-distance trade, which figured prominently in the local economy; and they served as a conduit for the importation of exotic and luxury goods that symbolized the special status of the ruling elites. Meanwhile, the dynasties patronized the Buddhists in return, participated in their rituals, and protected the interests of their monasteries.

Like the oasis dwellers of central Asia, then, the ruling elites of northern China made common cause with representatives of a foreign cultural tradition who had extensive political and commercial links in the larger world. This sort of voluntary conversion was the only way by which Buddhism could find a place in Chinese society. Buddhists entered China in numbers too small to bring about a massive social transformation by way of pressure or assimilation. Only by winning the favor and protection of elites could the early Buddhists ensure their survival in China. As it happened, when missionaries found ways to communicate

their message effectively to native Chinese and thus to bring a process of syncretism to their aid, their faith brought about a large-scale social conversion in China—but this development took place well after the era of the ancient silk roads....

Meanwhile, as Buddhism found tentative footing in China, both Buddhism and Hinduism attracted the attention of elites and won converts in southeast Asia. As in China, the carriers of Indian cultural traditions were mostly merchants. During the late centuries B.C.E., Indian traders began to sail the seas and visit the coastal towns of southeast Asia. Even during those remote centuries, there was considerable incentive for merchants to embark upon long and often dangerous voyages. According to an ancient Gujarati story, for example, men who went to Java never returned—but if by chance they did return, they brought with them wealth enough to provide for seven generations. By the early centuries C.E., southeast Asian mariners themselves traveled to India as well as to other southeast Asian sites. The resulting networks of trade and communication invigorated not only the economic but also the political and cultural life of southeast Asia.

Among the principal beneficiaries of early trade between India and southeast Asia were the political and cultural traditions of India. Merchants from the subcontinent established diaspora communities, into which they invited Hindu and Buddhist authorities. Local chiefs controlled commerce at the trading sites they ruled, and they quickly became introduced to the larger world of the Indian Ocean. The ruler of an important trading site was no longer a “frog under a coconut shell,” as the Malay proverb has it, but, rather, a cultural and commercial broker of some moment. Trade and external alliances enabled local rulers to organize states on a larger scale than ever before in southeast Asia. The first of these well represented in historical sources—though by no means the only early state in southeast Asia—was Funan, founded along the Mekong River in the first century C.E. Through its main port, Oc Eo, Funan carried on trade with China, Malaya, Indonesia, India, Persia, and indirectly with Mediterranean lands. By the end of the second century, similar trading states had appeared in the Malay peninsula and Champa (southern Vietnam).

Indian influence ran so deep in these states that they and their successors for a millennium and more are commonly referred to as the “Indianized states of southeast Asia.” Indian traditions manifested their influence in many different ways. In a land previously governed by charismatic individuals of great personal influence, for example, rulers adopted Indian notions of divine kingship. They associated themselves with the cults of Siva, Visnu, or the Buddha, and they claimed both foreign and divine authority to legitimize their rule. They built walled cities with temples at the center, and they introduced Indian music and ceremonies into court rituals. They brought in Hindu and Buddhist

advisers, who reinforced the sense of divinely sanctioned rule. They took Sanskrit names and titles for themselves, and they used Sanskrit as the language of law and bureaucracy. Indian influence was so extensive, in fact, that an earlier generation of historians suggested that vast armadas of Indians had colonized southeast Asia—a view now regarded as complete fiction. More recent explanations of the Indianization process place more emphasis on southeast Asian elites who for their own purposes associated themselves as closely as possible with the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. They certainly found no lack of willing and talented tutors; the quality of Sanskrit literature produced in southeast Asia argues for the presence there of many sophisticated and well-educated representatives of Indian cultural traditions. But high interest in foreign traditions on the part of southeast Asian elites drove the process of Indianization.

By no means did indigenous cultures fade away or disappear. During the early years after their arrival in southeast Asia, Indian traditions worked their influence mostly at the courts of ruling elites, and not much beyond. Over a longer term, however, Indian and native traditions combined to fashion syncretic cultural configurations and to bring about social conversion on a large scale. . . . In any case, though, the voluntary conversion of local elites to Hinduism and Buddhism decisively shaped the cultural development of southeast Asia.

...

Of all the religions that established themselves in the Roman empire, however, none succeeded on such a large scale or over such a long term as Christianity. Its early experience thus calls for some discussion.

Christianity had many things in common with other religions that became widely popular in the Roman empire. It offered an explanation of the world and the cosmic order, one that endowed history with a sense of purpose and human life with meaning. It addressed the needs and interests of individuals by holding out the prospect of personal immortality, salvation, and perpetual enjoyment of a paradisiacal existence. It established high standards of ethics and morality, well suited to the needs of a complex, interdependent, and cosmopolitan world where peoples of different races and religions intermingled on a systematic basis. It was a religion of the cities, efficiently disseminated throughout the empire along established routes of trade and communication. It welcomed into its ranks the untutored and unsophisticated as well as the more privileged classes. It even shared with the other religions several of its ritual elements, such as baptism and the community meal. In many ways, then, early Christianity reflected the larger cultural world of the early Roman empire.

During its first three centuries, Christianity developed under a serious political handicap. The earliest Christians were associated with parties of rebellious Jews who resisted Roman administration in Palestine. Later Christians, even gentiles, refused to honor the Roman emperor

and state in the fashion deemed appropriate by imperial authorities. As a result, Christians endured not only social contempt and scorn but also organized campaigns of persecution. Meanwhile, the Roman state generously patronized many of the empire's pagan cults: in exchange for public honor and recognition, the emperors and other important political figures provided financial sponsorship for rituals, festivals, and other pagan activities.

Nevertheless, Christianity benefited from the work of zealous missionaries who were able to persuade individuals and small groups that the Christians' god possessed awesome and unique powers. They communicated this message most effectively among the popular masses by acquiring a reputation for the working of miracles—healing illnesses, casting out demons, bestowing blessings on the faithful—that demonstrated the powers at their god's disposal. Ramsay MacMullen has recently argued, in fact, that fear of pain and punishment, desire for blessings, and belief in miracles were the principal inducements that attracted pagans to Christianity in the period before the conversion of Constantine about the year 312 C.E.

A bit of information survives on one of the more effective of the early Christian missionaries, Gregory the Wonderworker, and it illustrates the importance of miracles for the building of the early Christian community. Gregory had studied with the great Origen,³ and he wrote several formal theological treatises. For present purposes, though, his significance arises from his work in the Roman province of Pontus (north central Anatolia) during the 240s. Early accounts of his mission record one miracle after another. Gregory's prayers prevented a pagan deity from exercising his powers, but upon request Gregory summoned the deity to his pagan temple, thus demonstrating his superior authority; as a result, the caretaker of the temple converted to Christianity. On several occasions individuals interrupted Gregory's public teaching; each time, Gregory exorcized a demon from the offensive party, proving widespread amazement and winning converts in the process. Gregory moved boulders, diverted a river in flood, and dried up an inconveniently located lake. By the end of his campaign, Gregory had brought almost every soul of the town of Neocaesarea into the ranks of the Christians, and surrounding communities soon joined the bandwagon. As in the case of Fotudeng in north China, Gregory's reputation as a miracle worker seized the attention of his audiences and helped him to promote his faith among pagans.

Did the conversions brought about by Christian miracle workers represent cases of conversion through voluntary association? To some extent, this interpretation seems plausible, in that converts voluntarily adopted Christianity as the cultural alternative that best reflected the

³Biblical scholar and Christian theologian, c. 185–254. [Ed.]

realities of the larger world—for example by offering access to powers not available to others. A reputation for the ability to work miracles helped missionaries to dramatize the benefits and blessings that Christianity promised to individuals and suggested that Christianity possessed an unusually effective capacity to explain and control the world. In other ways, however, the winning of early Christian converts differed from the more common pattern of conversion through voluntary association. Converts came from all ranks of society, not just those of merchants, rulers, and others who had extensive dealings with representatives from the larger world. Moreover, until the conversion of the emperor Constantine and the legalization of Christianity, there were some powerful disincentives to conversion, so that potential converts to the new faith had to weigh heavy political, social, and economic risks against the personal and spiritual benefits offered by Christianity.

On balance, then, it seems to me that the category of conversion through voluntary association helps at least in a limited way to explain the early spread of Christianity in the Mediterranean basin. From the viewpoint of Roman society as a whole, however, rather than that of individual citizens, early conversion to Christianity benefited especially from two additional developments that accompanied the process of conversion through voluntary association. In the first place, until the fourth century, Christianity spread largely through a process of syncretism. In the second place, following the conversion of Constantine, Christianity gained state sponsorship, and a process of conversion by political, social, and economic pressure consolidated the new faith as a securely institutionalized church. Both of these developments warrant some attention.

The decline of long-established pagan cults afforded an opportunity for Christianity to extend its influence by way of syncretism. Beginning in the third century, the pagan cults suffered progressively more difficult financial problems as the Roman economy went into serious decline. The Roman state could no longer afford to support the cults on the generous basis of centuries past. Wealthy individuals continued to provide a great deal of aid, but their sponsorship was more erratic and precarious than that of the state.

As the pagan cults failed to provide for the needs and interests of their followers, Christianity offered a meaningful alternative that was the more acceptable for its resemblance to the cults. In their rituals and their assumptions about the natural world, the early Christians very much reflected the larger culture of the late Roman empire. Like devotees of the pagan cults, they offered their sacraments as great mysteries, and there were pagan analogues to many of their rituals, such as the intonation of divine language, the use of special garments and paraphernalia, and even the observance of ceremonies like baptism and a community meal open only to initiates. Christians appropriated the power and authority associated with pagan heroes by emphasizing the virtues

of a saint or martyr with similar attributes. Eventually, Christians even baptized pagan philosophy and festivals, which served as new links between pagan and Christian cultures: St. Augustine transformed Neoplatonism into a powerful Christian philosophy, and the birthdate of the unconquered pagan sun god became Christmas, the birthdate also of Jesus. Thus from a very early date, Christianity appealed to Mediterranean peoples partly because of its syncretic capacity: It came in familiar dress, and it dealt with many of the same concerns addressed by the pagan cults.

The conversion of Constantine amplified the effects of syncretism by inaugurating a process of officially sponsored conversion that ultimately resulted in the cultural transformation of the entire Roman empire. Constantine favored Christians from the moment that he consolidated his hold on the imperial throne. In the year 313 he issued his famous edict of toleration, which for the first time recognized Christianity as a legal religion in the Roman empire. At some indeterminate point, Constantine himself converted to Christianity. Constantine's personal example of course did not lead to immediate Christianization of the Roman empire, or even of the army that the emperor directly supervised. In several ways, though, it brought long-term changes that favored the Christians' efforts. It brought immediate material benefits, as Constantine and his successors underwrote the construction of churches and showered Christians with financial support. It also brought an intangible but nonetheless important social benefit: Christianity gained more public respect than it had ever previously enjoyed. As a result, ambitious and reputable individuals of increasing prominence joined Christian ranks—especially because Christians received preferential consideration for high imperial posts. Finally, the legalization of their religion allowed Christians to promote their faith more publicly and more aggressively than ever before. From its earliest days, the Christian community had produced combative and confrontational spokesmen. After Constantine's edict of toleration allowed Christians to promote their faith publicly, they relentlessly attacked the pagan cults, sometimes sparking episodes of personal violence, forcible conversion of individuals, and destruction of pagan temples and images.

State sponsorship provided Christianity with the material and political support required to bring about social conversion on a large scale. Christianity quickly became the official and only legally tolerated religion of the Roman empire. Already by the late fourth century, the emperors had begun to prohibit observance of pagan cults. By no means, however, did the various pagan religions forfeit their claims to cultural allegiance. Pagan spokesmen resisted efforts to destroy their cults, and thanks to syncretism, their values and rituals to some extent survived in Christian dress. Nevertheless, by the late fourth century, Christianity had won a cultural and institutional initiative over paganism that it would never relinquish. . . .